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THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN FRANCE

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It is out of the question to present an even approximately complete picture of the religious situation in France at the present moment. Such an undertaking would require us to go far into the past and to show the origin and development of the different movements, both religious and antireligious, which either successively or simultaneously have influenced the French spirit. It would be necessary in particular to ascertain in what degree and in what fashion religious life in France has been affected by the terrible crisis which has just shaken humanity. In short, it would be necessary to delineate the distinctive characteristics of the principal religious groups if we were to attempt on the basis of the facts thus ascertained to apprehend the religious spirit of France.

We shall content ourselves in this article with the mention of certain features of the actual situation without pretending in any way to exhaust a peculiarly rich field of material.

The complexity of the situation is due in part to the fact that during the last quarter of a century or less, religious development has been influenced either successively or sometimes simultaneously by several causes any one of which alone would have been sufficient to exercise a profound influence on the religious situation. The two most important of these are the separation between church and state and the war.

It is necessary first of all to consider the influence of these two causes. We may then pass in review the principal religious groups (Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Theosophy, and Free Thought, both religious and antireligious) and point out what is most characteristic of each group in the present situation. It would obviously be impossible to do this even with approximate completeness in the space at our disposal. In order to avoid treating so delicate a question in an obviously inadequate fashion, thus running the risk of not doing justice to any, we prefer deliberately to leave out of consideration Catholicism and the other non-Protestant religious groups and to speak in the remainder of this article especially of the conditions which prevail in French Protestantism.

I. THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

The development of ideas which ultimately found expression in the passing of the law of December 9, 1905, providing for the separation of church and state, is the outgrowth of a sentiment of hostility if not against religion at least against the Roman church. The framers of the law, however, did not yield to the demands of antireligious passion, but made a sincere and loyal attempt at a liberal solution. They desired to create a régime which should assure genuine religious liberty. If their intentions at certain points were only imperfectly realized, the fault is to be laid primarily upon the uncompromising attitude of the Roman church, which showed itself eager not for liberty but for domination. The evidence that the separation of church and state in and of itself implies no hostility to religious ideals is furnished by the brilliant campaign in support of the law conducted in the periodical *Le Siècle* by M. Raoul Allier, at that time professor and now dean of the faculty of Protestant theology at Paris.

The enforcement of the law of separation compelled the different religious communities to come to a clear understanding of their needs and to seek to face them squarely. They

were obliged to adapt themselves to a new situation, and to find in themselves the indispensable means for continuing their life. The test to which their members were thus subjected, placing them, as it did, on their honor, reacted to strengthen loyalty to the church. One naturally treasures that which has cost one an effort more than that which demands no sacrifice. Many believers felt henceforth attached to their church as soon as they realized more clearly that their church needed them. It is in this loyalty that the influence of the separation on religious life is to be found, and not in the realm of a reconquered liberty; for in the course of the nineteenth century the churches, at least the Protestant churches, had come to enjoy complete liberty in France. If at times Catholicism had seemed not to enjoy such liberty, the reason is to be found usually in some anticlerical fanaticism which had provoked in return a manifestation of clerical fanaticism.

The Law of Separation at once thrust religious questions to the fore.¹ We need only recall the debates and the polemics aroused by the preparation of the law and the vote upon it, the incidents often attended with violence provoked by the application of the law, the obstinate resistance maintained in Catholic churches to the carrying out of a formal inventory of the property, the obligation under which the government found itself of providing new legal arrangements, in order to avoid the necessity of closing the churches which legally should have been put solely at the disposal of "worshiping associations," when the Catholics refused to organize themselves in such associations following instructions which came from Rome quite contradictory to the proposals of the French bishops. All this called attention to the religious problem and compelled many people who had hitherto little suspected the primary importance of the religious factor to recognize its place in the

¹ It is to be noted that religious history in France has increasingly become an object of interest. A glance at the development of the religious sciences would show this clearly. The latest manifestation of this interest is the creation of a society of the history of religions under the name of the Société Ernest Renan.

life of the people. Who can measure the direct and indirect importance of this lesson taught by undoubted facts?

II. THE INFLUENCE OF THE WAR

What has been the influence of the war on the religious life? To this question very diverse replies can be made, even contradictory conclusions, in each one of which some element of truth might be found. It depends on the angle from which one views things, and the particular sequence of events which one takes into consideration, whether one says that the war exercised a profound and lasting influence on the religious life of France, or on the other hand, that its influence was quite superficial and transitory. It may be contended that it has deepened the religious sentiment in the souls of men, or that it has alienated them from religion.

The war required a concentration of all the energies of France which would never have been complete and consequently would never have been entirely efficacious if it had not included also religious forces. It is to the credit of President Poincaré that he understood this from the very beginning of the crisis, and that in August, 1914, he published an appeal for a *union sacrée* which was universally regarded. The religious forces were not the last to put themselves at the service of the country. Whether it was a matter of giving general support, of undertaking enterprises to sustain morale either at home or at the front, of coming directly to the aid of the soldiers, or of defending either at home or abroad the just cause of France, the representatives of the churches were in the front ranks of those who were eagerly active. No appeal to their co-operation was ever made in vain; Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and Free Thinkers, co-operated under all circumstances. Like good and loyal Frenchmen, all together responded to the appeal. It is particularly to the credit of the Catholics that they proved themselves so loyal. Many times, it is true, they found themselves divided in sentiment

between the inspiration of their patriotism and the explicit directions which came to them from Rome. Under these difficult circumstances the French Catholics never once swerved from the pathway indicated by a passionate love for country. They had the good fortune to have at their head during the critical years of the war a man of well-attested patriotism, who had in him the making of a real leader, and who was at the same time a very shrewd politician, Mgr. Amette, Cardinal Archbishop of Paris. This prelate was able, without disobeying the directions which came to him from Rome, to interpret them, often to amend them, in the matter of prayers for peace, for example, in such a way as not to offend even the most sensitive patriotism, while at the same time formally maintaining a perfectly deferent and submissive attitude toward the pontifical authority.

The attitude maintained during the war by the representatives of the different churches naturally had its influence on the relations between the political power and the churches. A government which during the war had never appealed in vain to the representatives of the churches could not with the coming of peace begin again to ignore them as it had before the crisis. Although the principle of the separation between church and state was never called in question, nevertheless the plan to re-establish an ambassador at the Vatican, as well as other more or less important symptoms, show that the relations between the churches and the state are about to enter upon a new phase.¹ It would indeed be impossible to prophesy just what this new phase will be. In a large measure this depends upon the wisdom which shall be manifested on both sides. The religious peace which seems actually to be in sight might indeed be compromised if Catholicism, as it has so often done in the course of history, should undertake

¹ It is doubtless due to a similar cause that antireligious propaganda now seems to avoid certain noisy manifestations to which it willingly gave itself a few years ago. It does not appear, however, that the traditional attitude of certain forms of free thought toward religion has at bottom greatly changed.

to meddle in the affairs of the state and to exercise an influence not simply religious but definitely political.

The co-operation of the representatives of the different churches in the manifold activities made necessary by the war brought these churches into mutual relationships and led them to co-operate under conditions which had never been previously realized. The *Comité du Secours National* in which Cardinal Amette, Pastor Wagner, and the foremost rabbi of France sat side by side, is one of numerous examples. Frequent also were the public occasions when bishops, pastors, and rabbis were seen side by side. At the front instances of co-operation were common. The chaplains of the different religious organizations, sharing the same life and facing the same dangers, could not ignore one another. Bonds of attachment were thus formed which could never have been realized in peace. But interesting as these facts are, their significance should not be exaggerated, nor should they be used as a basis for hope that in the nearer or more remote future there may be a genuine *rapprochement* between Protestantism and Catholicism. If this hope was entertained by some idealists, the course of events will surely dissipate their illusions. The recent decision of the Holy Office forbidding Catholics to participate in any way in the moral and religious undertakings of non-Catholics is very significant in this connection. Indeed, how could the Catholic church without abjuring itself give up its claim to be the sole depository of truth and of salvation? Catholicism would cease to be Catholicism if the war had led it to modify in any particular its attitude with regard to other Christian confessions.

It is much less easy to estimate the influence of the war on religious life itself. Here one must be on his guard not to indulge in hasty generalizations, or to derive from particular observations conclusions more far-reaching than the facts would warrant. The shock produced by the war seemed at first to provoke a reawakening of religious life. Amid the

most diverse circumstances, among Protestants as well as among Catholics, attendance at the churches was very large. Perhaps this was simply a transient situation due less to fundamental religious needs than to a kind of nervous shock and to the bewilderment provoked by the unexpected appearance of a terrible situation for which no one was prepared. What we may observe, however, is that the attraction exercised by the churches in the first months of the war speedily diminished, according to the testimony even of those who were most rejoiced by it and who greeted it as the forerunner of a veritable religious renaissance. It would nevertheless be hasty to affirm that nothing remains of this movement which began with the outbreak of the war. One fact alone shows that such a conclusion would be unwarranted. We have in mind the very large audiences which for two consecutive winters have gathered every Tuesday in Paris to attend the religious conferences conducted by Professor Raoul Allier.

Another fact worthy of note is that in the Protestant churches¹ during the war and after the war certain pastoral vocations arose which would not have come into existence under other circumstances. Many a young man who was following a different career has felt the call to abandon this in order to take, in the ministry, the place of a brother who died on the field of honor. We have seen many an officer refuse brilliant opportunities in order to become a student of theology. In November, 1919, when the soldiers returned after the conclusion of peace, at a time when the whole domain of practical life and of advantageous opportunities lay open to young men, and when the preoccupations and needs of material efforts seemed to dominate everything, the Protestant school of theology in Paris received more students than had entered at any time for twenty years.

We have here, undoubtedly, symptoms of a renewal and a revival of religion. These may readily be noted, but what

¹ The same is true of the Catholic church.

may be called the negative symptoms may easily escape observation. The weakening, and even the disappearance of religious sentiment are facts of the inner life, and it is only under exceptional circumstances that these express themselves in objective form. Here we are dealing with the mystery of personal life. If under favorable circumstances the veil may be occasionally lifted which conceals this life, nevertheless as a general rule it is out of reach of direct observation.

The formidable problem of evil was not created by the war. The death of a single infant is sufficient to raise this question in its full scope, and such monstrosities as pauperism, alcoholism, and debauchery raise for every soul capable of reflection the question of divine omnipotence. At the same time it is true that the war gave to the problem a magnitude and an acuteness which many people had hitherto not perceived. The thousands upon thousands of dead, of mutilated, of widows, of orphans, of mourning parents, the material and moral ruins heaped up on the soil of France, in short, the intensity and the duration of the disaster gave a new importance and a tragic seriousness to the objections which theodicy undertakes to meet. Is it surprising that there have been many persons who, not being able to surmount these difficulties, have been incapable of enduring the heavy weight of doubt, and who have felt their inner life completely exhausted? For such persons the conception of an all-powerful providence and faith in a fatherly God have crumbled. These inner dramas of the soul have most frequently remained concealed. They have not always brought about a definite rupture with the church. In many cases, indeed, the religious practices and attitudes of former times have continued. Nevertheless, we have here certain facts which, even if they cannot be definitely enumerated ought not to be overlooked in estimating the religious consequences of the war. But it would be unjust here to speak only of the losses. Is it not in some sense evidence of progress that in place of an attitude composed

of habit, conventionality, and routine, there should be an attitude of personal concern in relation to religious problems? And is not the soul, which in response to the stimulus of grief has confronted traditional beliefs with its own intimate experiences and emotions, religiously superior to the soul which passively accepts a ready-made faith?

It has also occurred that the crisis due to the war has developed or at least has given birth in certain souls to religious forms, which although not specifically Christian have, nevertheless, a very high value. Among those attitudes which the war created in the heart are to be found numerous admirable examples of a stoicism worthy of ancient teachings and a love for country which in many choice souls has a genuinely religious character and value. However difficult it may be to speak of it, a word certainly should be said concerning it, lest we neglect a trait which might not be reckoned by those less sympathetic or less respectable among the factors which make up the religious situation of present-day France. But we cannot here pursue this matter farther.

III. PROTESTANTISM

Separation of church and state had absolutely no effect upon the religious principle of Protestantism. It simply compelled Protestantism to adjust itself to a new situation. In the first place it was necessary to find material resources to take the place of the subsidy which formerly had come from the state, and which, moreover, had never constituted more than a portion of the Protestant budget. More delicate and more serious because of the consequences which it entailed was the work of organization rendered necessary by the circumstances.

There were in France before the separation, two Protestant churches recognized by the state—the Lutheran and the Reformed. The former was the only one which possessed a unified organization. Divided into two districts (Paris and

Montbéliard), each with its definite synod, it was administered as a whole by a general synod. The Paris district was almost exclusively orthodox in tendency, with a strongly marked pietistic strain. The Montbéliard district was predominantly liberal, and the spirit of loyalty to the Lutheran confession was less developed. The two districts had always lived in perfect harmony within the framework of an organization flexible enough to permit each one of them to develop freely according to its own genius. It seemed then entirely natural to continue a system which had proved successful. It needed only to be adjusted to the new situation.

Quite different was the situation in the Reformed church. Historically this church in France has been organized on the basis of Presbyterian synods, but at bottom the division between orthodox and liberal views was so profound and had occasioned such lively polemics that after a single experiment made in 1872, which only served to bring clearly to light the irreconcilable opposition between the two parties, the government never again convoked any official synods. The Reformed church was thereby reduced, officially at least, to an administration by the consistories alone.

Taking advantage of this legal status, the orthodox party provided an organization for itself, and created officious synods which made the foundation of their discipline a strictly orthodox confession of faith voted by the majority of the general official synod in 1872. When the separation took place, the orthodox party desired to reorganize in the framework prepared by these officious synods. The declaration of 1872 was the chart of these churches. It was to be explicitly accepted by all pastors when they were ordained. All attempts to secure certain concessions¹ met with an unalterable and haughty refusal to compromise. Thus there came to be constituted through the action of only a part of the Reformed communities,

¹ For example, the provision of an introductory formula in order to modify somewhat the formula of 1872 and to harmonize it with the principles of the freedom of modern thinking.

a church rigorously orthodox, at least in principle, for experience has proved that the confession of 1872 is not in and of itself a sufficient guaranty against heresy. An important part of those who until 1905 had remained attached to the officious synods now did not feel themselves justified in approving decisions the inevitable consequence of which was to tear asunder the Reformed church of France when their most ardent desire was to reunite all the members in one and the same body. The dissenters, however, did not immediately join themselves with the liberal group, although this group had done everything possible to facilitate the union of the Reformed churches. The group which had separated from the legally organized church, even though in matters of ecclesiastical polity it was in accord with the liberals, felt itself more closely related to the orthodox groups in theological and religious matters, and hesitated to take a position in opposition to the orthodox group. The leaders of this group believed also that by remaining in a position between the two extreme parties they might some day serve as a point of union for that *rapprochement* which they continued to desire with all their hearts. Their hope was not justified by the facts, and, compelled by the logic of the situation, the middle party, the Jarnac group (as it was called from the name of the city where its constitutive assembly was held) finally united with the liberal party with which it had, moreover, up to that time maintained the most fraternal relation.

The organization of these church groups, together with the controversies and discussions which accompanied it in the press, had the result of strengthening on both sides the spirit of partisanship and of postponing, if not entirely dissipating, any hope of re-establishing a united reformed body.

Nevertheless, at the critical time when the schism was being consummated, many Reformed Protestants refused to accept as inevitable a situation in which they saw a source of weakness for all Protestantism. Recognizing clearly that time must be left to soften sensitiveness at certain points and to

modify certain antitheses, they devoted themselves to the plan of bringing the different Reformed churches together in the field of practical activity. It seemed that much could be hoped for from this plan. There existed before men's eyes the example of the traditional relations between the Lutheran churches and the Reformed churches, showing that ecclesiastical separation might very well go along with a feeling of real and profound unity. Although belonging to churches differing in their historical origins, and each having its own peculiar psychology and genius, Lutherans and Reformed Christians have always co-operated in a great variety of enterprises. A *Protestant* sentiment has always supplemented any particular ecclesiastical loyalty in France, whether Lutheran or Reformed. It seemed therefore possible to hope that above all ecclesiastical divergencies there might be developed a unified reform sentiment which might gradually grow in strength and pave the way for a better future. In various ways men have devoted themselves to this task while at the same time continuing to strengthen the Protestant sentiment.¹ Such efforts, of course, cannot be expected to achieve immediate results. For the present, however, it can be recognized that they are at least not useless. The opposition between the different church groups is at present less acute than it was a dozen or fifteen years ago. This can be verified constantly. The pastors belonging to the younger generation, in particular those who entered the ministry within the last fifteen or twenty years, show a notable indifference with regard to the ecclesiastical questions in which their elders were passionately interested. Although the war did not create this tendency, it favored it because it brought out the fact that there are tasks infinitely more urgent and more appealing than ecclesiastical discussions.

¹ The efforts which have resulted in the organization of the *Fédération protestante* have in a way aided in this result. This federation, organized to represent and defend the general interests of French Protestantism, is constituted of delegates from the different churches. Although its authority is very limited, it has grown remarkably in strength since its birth, and seems destined to play an increasingly important part.

Nevertheless we ought not to lay too much emphasis on this tendency. Even if ecclesiastical hostilities have somewhat abated within French Protestantism, it would be exaggerating the matter to say that they have disappeared. Every once in a while some significant incident reminds aspiring spirits that they must not mistake their noble aspirations for accomplished facts. It would be superfluous to cite instances of this, but we must at least mention the existence of an ultra-conservative tendency which is conducting a very active campaign in the churches, organizing revivals and biblical conventions where the doctrine of verbal inspiration is taught and critical scholarship is anathematized. In this campaign members of Reformed churches, Baptists, Lutherans, and others co-operate. In other words, the leaders of this movement are much more concerned with polemics than with their positive principles.¹ This movement indicates a weakness in theological thinking which is not without its importance and its danger.

In present-day French Protestantism Christians are generally far more preoccupied with practical activities than with theoretical considerations. This is especially true among the youth. The war still further accentuated this tendency. Men are eager for action, and through that very fact are liable to underestimate the importance of careful thinking. Even those who must deplore this spirit of disdain, in which—it is to be hoped only temporarily—the problems of religious thought are involved, and who believe the attitude to be dangerous for the future of Protestantism, cannot fail to recognize that there is much which is noble and generous in the ardor with which youth throws itself into action and enthusiastically supports theories of a social Christianity. This practical movement, although not without some noisy declamation and some failure to do justice to the past of Protestantism and the achievements

¹ There exists also, especially in the North, a very active Adventist apocalyptic movement. The impending end of the world is proclaimed on the basis of calculations derived from the Book of Daniel and from the Apocalypse, showing the date of the return of Christ.

thus far accomplished in the churches, has at least had the merit of calling attention to urgent duties which the actual social situation imposes on Christian people.

This simply means that the task confronting Protestantism in France today is immeasurably great. The churches feel that it is not enough simply to keep alive, but that they will become stagnant and faithless to their responsibility if they do not in some fashion come through as victors. Immense fields are open to evangelization everywhere, but especially in the North where flourishing churches recently established, were destroyed by the war, and where the task of restoration is imperative. In other regions the outlook is not less favorable. We may mention merely the movements among the young people—the Federation of Christian Students, Christian unions of young men and of young women, the movement of the Boy Scouts—which during recent years have undergone a development suggesting the most optimistic expectations.

Along with these favorable symptoms, we must also note others which are less favorable. Protestant loyalty has been growing weaker.¹ This has come about partly through the indifference which has arisen in many people in regard to purely ecclesiastical questions. But it must be confessed it is due also to that scorn for theological thinking which we have just mentioned, for this is the consequence of an inadequate knowledge of the history and the principles of both Protestantism and of Catholicism. At any rate, it has come to pass that some spirits, generous or possibly somewhat naïve, have dreamed of an activity which should transcend the formal organization of the churches, and which should take a form liberally Christian, permitting the co-operation of Protestants and Catholics—a dangerous illusion, which cannot fail to lead those who espouse it to cruel disillusionment.

¹ Here we may note the frequency of mixed marriages which the Catholic church consents to bless only if the husband and wife promise that the children shall be educated as Catholics.

Another dark aspect of the situation is the material question. It is necessary to say a few words concerning this, for it rests like a dead weight on the actual situation of French Protestantism, and is a very serious menace to its future. Before the war, Protestantism had with difficulty succeeded in meeting budget requirements; that is to say, it had faced not only the expenses of the churches and the faculties of theology, but in addition different undertakings such as biblical societies, works of charity, evangelization, home and foreign missions. Since the war, the expenses of these undertakings have been extraordinarily increased. It has been found necessary—and this necessity has been met only in a very inadequate fashion—to raise the income of pastors who were still dependent on a salary so very low that in many of the presbyteries in France the problem of securing one's daily bread presented itself (and too often still presents itself) as an agonizing perplexity. Expenses of every kind have been greatly increased. Take a single example. Copies of the Bible and the New Testament now cost biblical societies six or seven times as much as before the war, and they have never been so much in demand. There should be added to this the cost imposed by the restoration of the destroyed churches, assistance needed by the victims of the war, the missions in the Kamerun which French Protestantism honorably undertook to take over when this country passed under French administration. This brief and incomplete survey shows what a financial burden rests on French Protestantism. Up to the present it has been possible to face these demands in part, thanks to generous gifts which have come, particularly from America, but how far this can continue is a question. This is a problem which anxiously presents itself to those who have the future of French Protestantism at heart.

We have just referred to the generous aid which the churches in France have received from their sisters across the ocean. This fact is not simply of material importance for French Protestantism. Its import extends much farther. The war

has created bonds between French Protestantism and Anglo-American Protestantism, and has indeed revealed these one to another. Thus there has come to birth in our churches what might be called an ecumenical Protestant sentiment. The importance of this sentiment should not be underestimated, nor the influence which it may exercise on the character of French Protestantism in its further development.

It may perhaps be asked what has been the influence on religious life of the return of Alsace to France. Here there is a Protestant group, for the most part Lutheran, which is not less significant than any of the other groups of French Protestants. The influence of this group has hitherto been somewhat restricted because of the peculiar situation found in Alsatian Protestantism. Nowhere was the return of Alsace to France greeted with more enthusiasm than among the French Lutherans whose church had been cruelly mutilated by the brutal victory of 1870. But inasmuch as the principle of the separation of church and state very wisely has not been put into effect in Alsace since the Armistice, no organic union has as yet been established between the Lutherans of Paris and Montbéliard and those of Alsace. The latter, moreover, have not lost the memory of the bitter ecclesiastical struggles which took place before 1870 in the higher consistory of Strasbourg between the representatives of Parisian orthodoxy and those of Alsatian liberalism. Consequently they have no serious regret that they have not yet found it possible again to enter into organic unity with the Lutheran church of France and to be constrained to give expression to friendly sentiments.

The question of organization, however, it goes without saying, is only a secondary one, and there is certainly much to be expected for the future of French Protestantism from the relations which cannot fail to become more and more close with Alsatian Protestantism, which has always been and is today an incomparable source of religious power and of Christian thought.

Up to the present, the consequences have not been what we have a right to expect because Alsatian Protestantism is passing through a serious crisis. Some of its pastors and theological professors who had come from beyond the Rhine or had at least been educated in German schools had adopted an attitude of loyalty to Germany which during the war alienated many members from the church. The departure of these since the Armistice has left vacancies which it has not yet been possible to fill entirely, although a certain number of French pastors have come to settle in Alsace. It is French Protestantism which has furnished in part the professors of the new theological faculty created at Strasbourg. Up to the present time Protestant Alsace has received from France more than she has given, but the time will come when Alsatian Protestantism, having been able to recover and having succeeded, it is to be hoped, in triumphing over certain inner divisions, will become a leaven for the life of all French Protestantism.

As will be seen, the Protestant churches are at this time at one of the decisive hours of their history. The part which they make take in the reconstruction of France might be very large, but their resources for activity are weak and seem totally out of proportion to the most urgent tasks. There would be reason to view the future with solicitude, almost with despair, if it were not for the fact that religious life is subject to a special power where there is no inevitable relationship between material resources and real action. Many times previously in its history French Protestantism has found itself face to face with tasks which seemed utterly beyond its power, but it has not in the end been unequal to these. For that reason in spite of its weakness, it has the right to look confidently forward. For that reason, it will be able to fulfil the mission to which it is called in France if ultimately it shall have in itself something of the spirit expressed in the words of the Apostle Paul: πάντα ἰσχύω (Phil. 4:13).